

WELS EVANGELISM THROUGH ST. PHILIP'S, MILWAUKEE:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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It's no coincidence that St. Philip's Church bears the name of the New Testament evangelist who was sent by the Holy Spirit to spread the good news of Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Picture the white WELS of the 50's establishing a church which is designated distinctively for the black community of Milwaukee's inner-city and then the connection becomes obvious. From the concerns and pioneering of a few individuals, the WELS finally became involved in this ripe field. This paper will overview WELS evangelism through St. Philip's, discussing the past, present, and future.

Background of the WELS in Milwaukee's Inner-city

St. Philip's Church is unique because it is the only individual church established by the WELS in Milwaukee's inner-city, maybe even in the country, to reach the unchurched black and to explore the black community. Sad to say, this is way too little and way too late. Some post World War II history helps to explain the drastic changes that took place in Milwaukee's culture.

It's no wonder that Milwaukee is the founding city of the WELS. For decades, Milwaukee was a community with a large concentration of German-speaking people who organized Lutheran congregations by the dozens. Houses, flats, apartments, and cottages built one on top of the other packed so many people into a one-block area that large congregations flourished within blocks of one another. This

is where the Wisconsin Synod began to feel the realities of inner-city life.¹

The minority population of Milwaukee was traditionally very small. But in the twenty years that followed World War II this changed dramatically. In the 50's and 60's, thousands of black families moved into Milwaukee's north side.² To us, who are living in the post civil rights era of the 1980's, this may not appear to be as big a problem as it really was. But recognize that this mass move took place before the heat of the civil rights movement of the 60's.

It is very true that sins of prejudice existed in the WELS. After all, we are sinners just like everybody else. White home owners held on to their property as long as it held its value. To sell to a black was like committing an unforgiveable sin. Once the first black-owned home appeared on the block, the rest rushed to sell before their property became worthless. One can imagine the devastating effect this had on the large WELS churches which were heavily concentrated, sometimes only a few blocks apart.³ White Lutherans evacuated their old neighborhoods and left their churches behind. Under these drastic conditions, some of the large Lutheran churches had two alternatives--relocate or die. That's exactly what happened. I won't attempt to record which churches relocated, which merged with other churches, which slipt into non-existence, and which survived. That's another church history paper or two. But,

3

at this point, the stage is set for the beginnings of St. Philip's.

Recalling that the 50's and 60's was a time of segregation helps to understand why the large Lutheran churches simply didn't absorb the masses of black families. Segregation was a way of life. White people did things with white people and black people did things with black people, even in public places. It's not that the white Lutherans who remained in the inner-city didn't want to share the Gospel with the blacks. It was just that they didn't want to share their churches. Today, this sounds horrible. Back then, it was a way of life.

In a short time (early 50's), white Lutherans began to realize their error. Slowly, things began to change. But it was too little, too late. Maybe it was because black culture sensed that the WELS invitations to join was a last effort to keep its churches financially alive.⁴ But I think that blacks weren't any more keen on being forced into white congregations any more than they were on being kept out earlier by force.

The Civil Right Act together with the Civil Rights Movement drastically altered the social climate in the area of black-white relations. The old prejudices did not die. But suddenly segregation was no longer the "in" thing. This change in the social climate appeared to be a ray of hope for those big inner-city congregation who either had to merge or die. White Lutherans were now free to work in

earnest to win black members for their congregations. And their black neighbors could begin to believe that the white congregations wanted them.

Declining inner-city congregations continued to do what they had been doing all alone. They canvassed, made prospect calls, conducted VBS, employed Seminary students to help in evangelism efforts. But the results were not encouraging. Inner-city congregations were still losing strength. Cultural differences still presented major barriers to inner-city evangelism efforts.⁵ This is the unique background to the WELS in Milwaukee's inner-city. This is quite an over-generalization, but suffice it to set the stage.

WELS Evangelism through St. Philip's: the past.

St. Philip's Evangelical Lutheran Church is an outgrowth of a survey done by the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. These surveys were conducted in the late 30's through the 40's. In 1952, through the efforts of Pastor Bertram Sauer, two information classes were formed.⁶ When Pastor Sauer became ill, Pastor Paul Knickelbein was called to continue his work. Pastor Knickelbein continued to instruct these two classes. Most of the members of these first two classes were confirmed on June 27, 1955. Along with these confirmands, four other black people who were members of other Lutheran churches became the beginning of St. Philip's Church.

During Pastor Knickelbein's pastorate, thirty other adults were confirmed. In the winter of 1955, the congregation was organized. Pastor Knickelbein served St. Philip's until February, 1956. Soon after this, the congregation, still a mission, was taken over by the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board. The church used the facilities at the corner of Fifth and Meinecke until November 1957. This first church building for St. Philip's was originally a broom factory. Then it became a Seventh Day Adventist church.⁷ This building was then purchased from the Adventists by the Synodical Conference Missionary Board to serve as the home of St. Philip's Lutheran Mission.

In February 1956, Pastor Milton Burk became the pastor of St. Philip's and the church continued to grow. The Mission Board realized that the facilities at Fifth and Meinecke were inadequate and could no longer suit the congregation's needs. But there was another problem. The church home belonged to the Synodical Conference and not to the WELS.

When St. Matthew's Church and School became available in 1957, because they were in the process of relocating to 84th and Melvina, the Mission Board agreed to purchase their property. Funds came from three areas: the Church Extension Fund, St. Philip's own members, and the balance of \$65,000 was raised by sister congregations of the Milwaukee area through special collections.

6

Then a development of great significance for St. Philip's had taken place. The district Mission Board authorized the St. Philip's Mission to call a teacher so that they could have its own school. While evangelism remains an essential part of inner-city mission work, another kind of neighborhood outreach that had proved to be even more effective in bringing blacks in to inner-city congregations opened through St. Philip's. And that is the Christian Day school.

It is not just a coincidence that the Lutheran congregations that were managing to survive in the inner-city atmosphere were the congregations that operated a Christian Day school. The school gave blacks a reason for looking twice at the Lutheran church. The troubles in the public school sent people looking for alternatives to the public school.⁸ Lutheran schools accepted black children as tuition students until their parents joined the congregation. Lutheran schools made it clear to parents that they were expected to learn the doctrines being taught their children in school, and those who agreed were accepted into membership. As can be expected, some only used the Christian Day school as an escape from lousy public school education. Not all those members became active members, but those who did put new life into inner-city churches, not only by filling pews and envelopes, but also by giving the white members a reason for staying. Now, in the fall of 1958 St. Philip's got its chance.

Their new facilities at the old St. Matthew's site came complete with a five-room school and auditorium. The December 8, 1957 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran looked to a bright future: "St. Philip's membership is still relatively small. There are 52 communicants, 95 souls, and 55 children in the Sunday School. Yet 25 of its children are attending one of the Milwaukee Lutheran schools (Bethesda). That indicates a strong interest in Christian education. Surely, then, a parochial school of its own should mean much for St. Philip's and its future."⁹ St. Philip's called Mr. Edward Meyer, a recent graduate of New Ulm, to be their first teacher.

With a strong interest in education, St. Philip's Church and School continued to grow. In a short time, two more teachers were called. To this present day, the school has been the major tool for evangelism in the surrounding inner-city neighborhoods of St. Philip's. Many of the church's strongest members today are people who learned the truths of the Gospel through this school.¹⁰

The 60's was a decade of change for St. Philip's not only in facilities but also in pastors. In 1964, St. Philip's had to make a change because its properties stood in the path of the planned expressway, the present I-43. Since the authorities probably wouldn't build a high rise bridge over St. Philip's, the congregation looked for a different location. The merging of two congregations, Divine Charity at First and Chambers with Divinity of

Whitefish Bay, was God's answer for St. Philip's. The Northwestern Lutheran reports: "St. Philip's Mission will have its first service in Divine Charity's facilities on June 13th." 11 First and Chambers remains the location of St. Philip's Church today. St. Philip's School continued to operate by using the rooms of the basement of the church. Pastor Burk remained pastor until he accepted a call to be the dean of men at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Since Pastor Burk's departure a little more than 20 years ago, the members of St. Philip's has had seven different pastors. Pastor Daniel Pautz accepted the call to replace Pastor Burk in 1967. But, due to his wife's severe illness, he accepted a call to Arizona a year later. Pastor Gary Schroeder followed Pastor Pautz. During his pastorate, St. Philip's evangelism and congregation awareness grew. After seven years, Pastor Schroeder took a call to serve as missionary in Hong Kong where he remains today. Pastor Schroeder holds a high place in the hearts of many.

Pastor Kurt Mahnke picked up where Pastor Schroeder left off in June, 1975. During his pastorate, the congregation added a part time kindergarten teacher. But, after only three years, Pastor Mahnke accepted a call to Prescott, Arizona.

Candidate James Witt took the helm in 1978. It was during his ministry at St. Philip's in 1980 that St. Philip's School merged with Jerusalem's School to form

Beautiful Savior Lutheran School. Evangelism through Beautiful Savior will be discussed later.

The last pastor before the present pastor was Helmut Flegel. He is a dark spot in St. Philip's history. He was asked to resign because of unscriptural divorce. But his offense goes much deeper. My purpose is not to gossip or to bring about something that hasn't been properly taken care of. Pastor Flegel had the responsibility of supervising a Big Brothers program in the inner-city. But what the Big Brothers, one of whom was myself, was not told was that AAL gave the program a \$14,000 grant. Helmut Flegel found other ways to use it. He did the same thing with funds given to his care for the German Radio Mission in Europe. Receipts concerning these crimes can be found at the Synod offices. You can ask me for the name of my source.

One very important point remains from all of this. Even though St. Philip's was served by many pastors over just a short period of time, and even one of those pastors used his ministry for personal gain, yet St. Philip's stands strong. That's because in WELS evangelism through St. Philip's, God blessed his Word. No matter how difficult the circumstances may be, God's Word is effective. That's a comfort that all evangelists and pastors of the truth have. "For the Word of God is living and active" (He. 4:12). "(My Word) will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). WELS evangelism in the past through St.

Philip's--fruitful because of the the power of God's Word despite the work of sinful people. The writer of the booklet for the 25th anniversary for St. Philip's in 1980 closes with these words:

Under the guidance of all St. Philip's pastors, the church has strived faithfully to hold to the precious truth of God's Word and to actively share the good news of the Savior with the people of the community. Our Lord Jesus is to be praised and honored for showering his grace on St. Philip's for the first 25 years of its history.12 -a member.

That's a product of WELS evangelism by the grace of God.

WELS Evangelism through St. Philip's, the present

If it weren't for the evangelism mindset of the members themselves, and God's grace, St. Philip's may not have survived the rest of the 60's and early 70's. It's easy to understand why evangelism is so important to St. Philip's today. Unlike many other WELS churches where much of the membership is made up of families who have been in the church for generations, St. Philip's first members were received through adult instruction. I really believe this is significant. They remember what it's like to be outside the truth. They treasure God's newly revealed grace to them in the gospel so that the privilege of the gospel isn't taken lightly the way too many people do who have been WELS all their life. Just as the members of St. Philip's grew in faith, so they spread that faith among their friends and relatives.

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Today, St. Philip's, jointly with Jerusalem since 1980, has a school called Beautiful Savior. Principal Ned Goede has been at St. Philip's since 1973 and is accompanied by teachers. St. Philip's pastor, Pastor Terry Reich, talked about the role of Beautiful Savior as an evangelism tool. "Beautiful Savior has been our primary evangelism tool. The majority of the members in St. Philip's came through direct contact with the school. Apparently, people are looking for a 'good' environment and a 'good' education for their children. They 'inadvertantly' find the Good Shepherd through the school and church."¹³

I talked with Principal Goede about the problem of the community just using the school to get their children into a private school. He said that the majority of parents don't come because of the religious instruction, but, with patience and work with the parents over 4 or 5 years, 65% eventually do become members.¹⁴ That is fantastic.

Pastor Mark Jeske has this insight on the school:

As far as I can tell, the school (and its parent schools, St. Philip's and Jerusalem) were the primary builders between white Lutheranism and black Milwaukee. Even today, while the two churches look quite rickety, Beautiful Savior appears well-run, with good facilities, and a powerful reputation in the neighborhood.¹⁵

Pastor Jeske speaks of the parent schools, Jerusalem and St. Philip's. Jerusalem is the old white church while St. Philip's is 95% black. Merging the school was a trick. Much more could be said about it but that is a topic for next year's vicar.

12

At present, I clearly see the power of God's Word working at St. Philip's even though I've only been there a few months. Under the leadership of Pastor Reich, several new organizations are becoming active. Most recently and almost surprising is a strong interest in a men's group. Among their planned activities is occasional church breakfasts, frequent social meetings, and discussions with young people concerning goals and the dangers and temptations of inner-city life. Faith is alive at St. Philip's as Pastor Reich sees his congregation voting to become self-supporting after more than 30 years of Synod assistance.¹⁶

Evangelism through St. Philip's is assisted by a senior from the Seminary. This is a program started about 8 years ago by the Inner-City Mission Committee.¹⁷ One can't often see the results of this evangelism effort by counting the number of prospects who come to church. The first purpose of the senior vicar is to spread the gospel. Church membership comes second and follows as a fruit. I always need to remind myself of this. Church membership doesn't get a person into heaven, but faith in Jesus Christ does.

Present day evangelism in Milwaukee's inner-city requires an understanding in black culture. Sometimes the needs that are found in black culture get in the way of a person's ability to see his most important--the need for a Savior. That's a need that is common in every culture. Paul writes, "There is no difference, for all have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God." As believers in Jesus, we have the answer to that need which everyone has, as Paul continues in that very same verse: "and (all) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came Christ Jesus." That need, which God has taken care of, is the most important need in every culture. The problem is that there are many other needs in black culture that get in the way of seeing the need for a Savior.

Some of those problems arise from the lack of a dominant male figure in black culture. It's a matriachal society. The black male has left his responsibility of providing, supporting, and properly teaching the family. We need to show the black 'family' (75% single parent)¹⁹ God the Father. We can show them God the Father's love for their souls and his care for their present life by telling them about Jesus.

Because of that fact that many homes are void of a father, the mother is forced to support the family on her own.²⁰ What's worse is that single parent families continue to produce more single parent families. We need to spread the love of Jesus in present day evangelism in black culture. By learning black culture, we see their needs which get in the way sometimes of seeing that biggest need, the need for a Savior from sin.

WELS evangelism in the present at St. Philip's is ripe and prosperous. With our faithful Pastor Reich who properly divides Law and Gospel, with our powerfully influential

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school that teaches God's Word, evangelism is carrying out God's will to have all men to come to the knowledge of the truth. As senior vicar, I see the members themselves doing evangelism in their lives. They bring friends and relatives to church. They give me names of people with whom they talked about Jesus at work. Evangelism at St. Philip's comes from the hearts of believers in Jesus.

WELS Evangelism through St. Philip's, the Future:

One thing about the future for St. Philip's evangelism that must never change is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The means of grace in Word and sacrament is the only way God chooses to change hearts. But several things about the delivery of that message may change in the future. Will the older membership of Jerusalem never be replaced so that Jerusalem and St. Philip's should merge just as their schools merged? What about synod assistance with seminary helpers? What are the advantages and disadvantages if some of these changes took place in St. Philip's future. To give some very good insight on these questions, I asked men who are well-versed in inner-city church work.

How would the merging of St. Philip's and Jerusalem into one congregation benefit the people and the unchurched in that area?

Pastor Terry Reich: "It would eliminate a lot of confusion about whose school Beautiful Savior is. It would

15

also simplify life for many of our parents who run shuttle-services for choirs on Sunday mornings between churches. The Jerusalem facility is also better maintained and offers a more pleasant worship environment. The biggest would be a feeling of ownership among all the members of St. Philip's in Beautiful Savior and an associate pastor situation would free up additional time for outreach efforts."21

Pastor Westendorf: "It should reduce expenses for staff and facilities. It would avoid the appearance of racial segregation."22

Pastor Mark Jeske: "It is not the unalloyed blessing that it might appear to be. There would be some sure benefits: getting St. Philip's rid of its debt burden and infusing new life and blood into the old and tiring Jerusalem. However, there is no doubt that when two churches are merged into one that some of the uniqueness is lost, that the merged identity is going to be less than the sum of the two parts. The WELS would be poorer for having one church instead of two."23

Mr. and Mrs. Joe Lynch (long-time members of St. Philip's): "There may be some financial benefits. As for the unchurched, I do not think either church has reached many of the people in the area."24

How detrimental is it, if at all, to these congregations and to the unchurched if these congregations remain unmerged?

Pastor Terry Reich: "I wouldn't call it detrimental, but it isn't very practical. The overhead costs, if combined into one location, could potentially eliminate much of the Synod subsidy and free up those dollars for other outreach, etc." 25

Pastor Mark Jeske: "For the time being, it seems that two churches offer more to the neighborhood than one. I don't know how much evangelism the two churches are doing, but it is nice to be able offer two different styles of WELS Lutheranism to meet people's needs and preferences." 26

Pastor Rolfe Westendorf: "The unchurched have little awareness that the two churches should be one. For their sake two evangelism programs are better than one. The present members are probably only mildly disturbed by the present situation."27

Should the Synod become more involved to help these churches?

Pastor Reich: "Not at the present time." 28

Pastor Westendorf: "Subsidy like welfare, leads to a loss of independence and initiative. Synod should provide occasional, not regular; moral, not financial support."29

Pastor Jeske: "NO. Let them work it out for themselves. Very, very few people in the Synod have any feeling or experience for working in cross-cultural ministry."30

7

Pastor Howard Kaiser (Chairman of MCMC): "The Synod, through our SEW DMB and Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, continues to be involved with our inner-city members. More???"31

Should the WELS be doing more personal work with the unchurched by emphasizing Gospel witness rather than working at building up the present churches in the inner-city?

(By this I mean the type of outreach that is occurring through Siloah. Two men focus at education with classes in individual homes rather than attempting church membership.)

Pastor Reich: "I think both types of work are needed because both will reach out to the lost souls with the gospel. However, in order to have a long-term impact on the inner-city and base from which to carry out the 'more personal work', we have to strive to build up the present churches."32

Pastor Jeske: "Both are important. They shouldn't be pitted against each other. The work of the two missionaries to the poor will have no lasting value unless these people are grafted onto a congregation somehow and somewhere. Local congregations are still the Synod's and city's best hope."33

Pastor Westendorf: "Most people are better off with a church home. We think some people cannot be reached through a conventional congregational ministry. If that success

18

proves to be ongoing, the Synod should expand such ministry." 34

The future of WELS evangelism through St. Philip's faces many difficult questions. It appears that no decision will be void of disadvantages. These must be weighed over much consideration and prayer. Whatever the future changes may be for St. Philip's, as long as the gospel is proclaimed in its truth and purity, God promises his blessing. That's the comfort St. Philip's has as it continues to carry out God's will in Milwaukee's inner-city.

NOTES

- 1 "WELS In The Inner-city," Rolfe Westendorf, March 1, 1982, p. 1.
- 2 Ibid. p. 1.
- 3 Ibid. p. 1.
- 4 Ibid. p. 3.
- 5 Ibid. p. 4.
- 6 Twenty-fifth Anniversary booklet
- 7 "The Northwestern Lutheran," December 8, 1957, p. 390.
- 8 Interview with Mr. Ned Goede.
- 9 "The Northwestern Lutheran," December 8, 1957.
- 10 Interview with Pastor Terry Reich.
- 11 "The Northwestern Lutheran," May 30, 1965.
- 12 Twenty-fifth Anniversary booklet.
- 13 Interview with Pastor Reich
- 14 "WELS In The Inner-city," p. 10.
- 15 Interview with Pastor Mark Jeske.
- 16 Interview Pastor Reich.
- 17 "WELS In The Inner-city," p. 11.
- 18 "The Inner-city Call," Rolfe Westendorf, July 2, 1975, p. 6.
- 19 "The Milwaukee Journal," March, 1986.
- 20 "The Inner-city Call," p. 9.
- 21 Interview with Pastor Reich.
- 22 Interview with Pastor Rolfe Westendorf.
- 23 Interview with Pastor Jeske.
- 24 Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Joe Lynch.

- 25 Interview with Pastor Reich.
- 26 Interview with Pastor Jeske.
- 27 Interview with Pastor Westendor f.
- 28 Interview with Pastor Reich.
- 29 Interview with Pastor Westendor f.
- 30 Interview with Pastor Jeske.
- 31 Interview with Pastor Howard Kaiser.
- 32 Interview with Pastor Reich.
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